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The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

Legal Eagles of Louisiana

Posted on 14/02/2014 by [John Cairns](#)

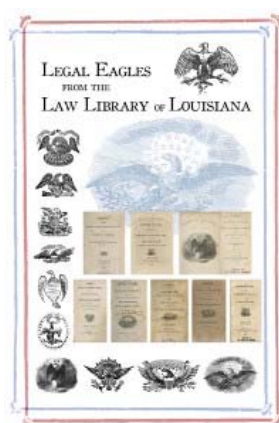
Legal Eagle is what the OED describes as a rhyming collocation. The term goes back to the 1940s, and is first found in the U.S.A.

This Blog has a long-standing interest in Louisiana and its law. Louisiana is of course known as the Pelican State because of the adoption of the native brown pelican as the state bird. On the State Flag, a hen Pelican feeds her young with her own blood. Formalised in 1912 (and again in 2006) a pelican flag has in fact been used since the 1860s.

The bald-headed eagle has been the symbol used on the seal of the U.S.A. since 1782. It is a powerful symbol, the bird of Zeus, whose form he would sometimes take, and it is much used in heraldry, its wings outstretched generally symbolising protection.

The Law Library of Louisiana has just produced a poster as an exhibit, featuring symbolic eagles used by New Orleans printers in the early days of statehood (which came in 1812). Interestingly enough, one image depicts the eagle in the pose later used for the pelican, feeding her young with blood from her breast. It occurs on a French-language title page for acts passed by the first legislature of the new State. Over it is a ribbon bearing the words "Union" and "Confidence". Also on the poster, but without a corresponding title page, is a medallion of another eagle, standing on a palm branch bearing in its beak a crown of laurel or olive, with the words Territory of Orleans surrounding the top half of the medallion with other devices – an intriguing symbol.

All of this points in an imaginative way to a fertile field for research. The Law library of Louisiana is to be congratulated for this stimulating display of symbols potent with meaning.



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